
Editorial: Thank You, Google

Ann Okerson

Ever since the announcement of the big cooperative projects between Google and a few major research libraries over a year and a half ago, I have felt like a ping pong ball being batted back and forth between two predictable conversations on the subject, the obsessive one and the frightened one.

The obsessive conversation is focused on the “deal” (How much did they get? How much does it cost?) and the copyright implications (What will happen to the non-public domain works? Is Google’s program covered by copyright’s fair use provisions?). The terms of the deals done with Michigan and with the University of California system have become available on the Web for all to see, and the e-mail lists and blogs are full of opinions about the copyright implications. I am as interested as the next person, but I try to keep two things in mind: Google has a lot of money, and Google has lawyers. Those attributes usually get corporations a lot of what they want, and they can take care of themselves.

The frightened conversation is just among librarians: what will become of *us*? Is this the magic moment, dreamed of since Vannevar Bush’s vision in 1945, when *everything* goes digital? Will we even *need* libraries any more, or will Google do it all?

Serials librarians are no strangers to these conversations, even though Google’s immediate project has been focused mainly on non-serial publications. The world of serials is already being upended by the near-universal provision of electronic forms of traditional journals and lively conversations about when we will “stop print” and trust the digital copies for all purposes. But while most of the journal publishing world still looks familiar, a few at least have begun to observe that Google Scholar—Google’s interface to the journal literature—keeps getting more inclusive and more effective all the time, and one is beginning to meet scholars and scientists who think they use Google Scholar all the time.

I want to start having another conversation, neither obsessive nor fearful, but ambitious. Here is how it would start.

For years, we have wondered what it would take to digitize the bulk of our collections. We have heard people say it is impossible and we have heard people say it is inevitable. Sometimes the same people say both things. Now it is almost happening. No, Google is not digitizing *everything*, but by the time they finish with the complete contents of a couple of major research libraries, they’ll have passed a significant tipping point.

What I want to say is, “Thank you” and next “And now what?” We are being handed a huge gift by Google. We did not have to develop a massive RFP and solicit vendors, and most of all we do not have to pay for what Google is doing. This is the most colossal outsourcing deal in the history of libraries—and all of us are getting it for nothing.

But now go into your library and look around. This gigantic asteroid is passing our neighborhood, exercising a massive gravitational force on the traditional print collection, and pulling all those invisible digits into cyberspace. Should not this be making a difference? Why don’t we see that it has yet? What difference should it make?

We librarians inherit a long tradition in which libraries make every heroic effort to stand on their own two feet and do all their own business for themselves. Then gradually, bit-by-bit, we have given up some functions to achieve collaboration and efficiency. For example, we search and obtain our catalog records from cooperative organizations such as OCLC; we let vendors supply our approval plans; we buy our library management systems from commercial vendors; and now we form consortia to license electronic journals, books, and databases. Every day in my library, I see us doing things that come as near as making no difference to exactly duplicating what other people are doing in other like libraries. We install MetaLib or SFX and customize these vendor softwares to make sure they display our own logo; we tailor make our subject Web pages to our communities. Too much of our work, while highly skilled, is duplicative and redundant.

When I finish thanking Google, I want to say, is not this an opportunity to look again at all the things we do, each of our libraries, on our own? Should not we be finding ways to consolidate and collaborate now, far

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more *aggressively* than every before? I do not know of any library that could not benefit from the savings of money and human resource that greater consolidation and collaboration would bring. At the same time, there are everyday challenges that libraries cannot yet meet—challenges to work more closely with faculty and students, to better support teaching and research. Is

not *that* the direction our efforts should be going? Is not the best way to spend your or my institution's dollars on direct support for the vital academic life all around us?

It is high time—if you ask me—to say yes to those questions and to say thank you to Google for giving us some inspiration to think more collaboratively and to think bigger than we ever have before.